

The Wrong Race

"There is a kind of mad momentum intrinsic to the development of all new nuclear weaponry," Secretary McNamara said yesterday in announcing President Johnson's decision to install a "thin," "China-oriented" \$5 billion anti-ballistic missile system over the next five years. And he added: "The danger in deploying this . . . system is going to be that pressures will develop to expand it into a heavy Soviet-oriented ABM system."

This is indeed the danger, and it is demonstrated in no small way by the very decision which Mr. McNamara made the occasion for an eloquent and compelling argument against a race for armaments and in favor of a "race towards reasonableness." Just last January, Mr. McNamara was telling the Senate Armed Services that a decision to build a Chinese-oriented ABM system "need not be made this year." In the meantime, he has produced no fresh evidence which would suggest a heightened Chinese threat. There has, however, been very heightened political pressure for an American ABM system to counter suspected ABM deployments by the Russians. One can only conjecture whether this pressure may not have had something to do with the decision to announce the beginnings of a "thin," anti-Chinese ABM system at this time, and wonder, too, about the "reasonableness" of this.

Still less is the layman able to judge with much competence whether such a "thin" system is needed at all. On this point, the word and judgment of those who possess the intelligence data and the incredibly intricate technical knowledge must be taken largely on faith, for there was little in the Secretary's address to document this need.

Where Mr. McNamara was considerably more persuasive, however, was in his argument that the next step—towards a heavy ABM system—would take us and the Russians off on a "foolish and feckless course." It would, the Secretary said, be a strong inducement for the Soviets to "vastly increase their own offensive forces." And this, he added, would "make it necessary for us to respond in turn—and so the arms race would rush hopelessly on to no sensible purpose on either side."

This is the heart of the matter. And if we are obliged to assume that the Administration knows what it's talking about when it talks of the need for a "thin," Chinese-oriented ABM system, we must also assume that our officials and our experts and our scientists also know what they are talking about when they say that the Russian-American nuclear arms race has passed the point where either contestant can hope to gain decisively by continuing it.

If the Russians want to continue it anyway, out of false hope or for their own internal political needs, they would not require the pretext of the President's decision to deploy a new ABM missile system. Pretexts for arms spending can always be found. Conversely, if they see some merit in an agreement which would ratify the current stand-off, and slow or halt the nuclear arms race, they can quite readily ignore our ABM deployment for they are, after all, installing some such system of their own.

It is up to them—and up to us. If there is to be a race towards reasonableness, as Mr. McNamara more rightly said, "we had better all run that